

A Dialect in the Face of the Standard: A Japanese Case Study

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A dialect in the face of the standard: a Japanese case study

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0. Introduction. The relationship between a local dialect and a national standard has been the topic of many sociolinguistic studies. Aside from the prestige which national standards invariably have, it has also often been found that non-standard dialects too can have local prestige (Labov 1963, Trudgill 1972). The present paper, a study of the Japanese city of Yonezawa, shows the conflicting feelings of its residents: (1) the prestige which they have had for hundreds of years as a regional center, and (2) the feeling of being marginalized as speaking a nationally stigmatized dialect. However, the situation is somewhat different here than what has been described in studies of local prestige in Western society such as those of Labov and Trudgill, because of the feudal origins of the local prestige group, so that even today the prestige of the local dialect extends to all social classes. In order to understand this, it will be necessary to analyze historical, sociopsychological, political, and ethnological aspects of the situation.

Yonezawa is a city of 91,000 people, located in Yamagata Prefecture, in the Tohoku District, which is on the north tip of the main island of Japan. Upon hearing someone speaking the Yonezawa dialect, Japanese from other regions would recognize it as some variety of the Tohoku dialect, which is generally stigmatized at the national level. After briefly describing the characteristics of the Tohoku dialect, I will discuss its social aspects, that is, how the society defines its own dialect and what kind of emotional value the people feel for it as opposed to Standard Japanese. The second part of the paper will discuss the specific situation of the Yonezawa Dialect and how its speakers react to opposing pressures to maintain and eliminate this dialect. Its national stigmatization comes from its being an isolated and underdeveloped area. Its local prestige comes from its association with the Uesugi Clan, which had been nationally powerful prior to the establishment of the Tokugawa Shogunate at the beginning of the 17th century. At that time the Uesugi Clan's territory was drastically decreased and they built their new castle in Yonezawa, transforming it from a village of 800 households to a city of 130,000 people in the next 100 years (Kamimura 1977). Though the importance of the clan has decreased over the years, the city still feels the prestige of being associated with one of the major clans of Japan's feudal times, and this prestige extends to their feelings about the local dialect.

The data used in this paper were collected in the summer of 1994. They consist of tape recordings made at various places, e.g. school conversations, private tutoring, conversations in the waiting room of a hospital, and interviews with people of different ages; I will also discuss the results of a questionnaire survey.

1. Tohoku Dialect. At the time of the Meiji Restoration in 1867, the dialect which was spoken by 'educated people' (Joo'o 1992) in Edo (present-day Tokyo) was designated as Standard Japanese. However, the majority of people in the western part of the country, where the historical capital Kyoto is located, opposed or at least were not happy with this decision. In the study of language attitudes, Japanese have focused on the Kansai Dialect, spoken in the Kyoto area,

which is considered to be the main rival of Standard Japanese. For this reason, the study of Tohoku Dialect, especially the aspect of its perception, has been neglected to a large extent.

1.1. General linguistic features of the Tohoku Dialect. Some dialectologists state that the Tohoku Dialect is the one which is farthest from Standard Japanese (Shibata 1978). This statement represents most people's attitude toward this dialect; it is not popularly considered to be an ordinary Japanese dialect. In this section I will discuss some of the features of the Tohoku Dialect.

1.1.1. Voicing of postvocalic voiceless stops and affricates. Stops and affricates are voiced following vowels, as in (1) (in this and following examples, I will give the dialect (D) in the first line and Standard Japanese (S) in the second):

- (1) D: Udzu-do kaedde-guru.
 S: Ūtsu-to kâette-kuru.
 hit-if return-come
 'If (you) hit (it), (it) comes back.'

Depending upon the rate of speech, this voicing can take place across a morpheme boundary or even a word boundary.

1.1.2. Absence of pitch accent. Pitch accent, a general feature of Japanese, does not exist in the Southeastern Tohoku Dialect. The standard language contrasts between *hâshi* 'chopsticks' and *hashî* 'bridge', *kakî* 'persimmon' and *kâki* 'oyster', etc. are neutralized in this area.¹

1.1.3. Phrase-final high-low intonation. In the eastern coastal area of the Tohoku region, the final mora of a phrase is often lengthened, beginning with a higher pitch than the preceding words and then dropping to and holding at midlevel. For example:

- (2) Kinôo uji-sa kaeddarâ
 Kinoo uchi-e kâettara
 yesterday home-to return-when
 'when (I) got home yesterday...'

1.1.4. Merger of *i* and *u*. *i* /i/ and *u* /u/ merge as *u* /ki/. Furthermore, *shi* /ʃi/, *su* /su/, and *shu* /ʃu/, *zi* /dzɪ/, *zu* /dzɯ/, and *dju* /dʒɯ/ merge as *su* /sɪ/ and *zu* /dzi/ respectively, yielding many homonyms. For example, *shûjutsu* 'surgical operation', *shichiji* 'seven o'clock', and *shijitsu* 'historical fact' are all pronounced as *suzuzu*. According to Shibata (1978), it is this last merger which is responsible for the popular name of the Tohoku Dialect *Zuuzuuben*, 'Zuuzuu dialect'.

1.1.5. Usage of tag-particle *be*. According to Inoue 1985, the particle *be* functions in the Tohoku Dialect to express intention and guessing, although some subdialects have only one of these two functions. This feature is often exaggerated by mass media in its TV dramas and shows. *Be* with this function is actually not only found in the Tohoku District, but also in Kantoo District as well as Chuubu (Central) District. Recently, the form *be* has been subjected to a variety of morphophonemic processes, e.g.: (Inoue 1985b)

- (3) okiru + **be**--> okirube, ogirube, ogimbe, ogippe

okiru + da + **be**--> okiru-dabbe, okiru-dambe
 wake up intention/guess
 'Let's wake up.' OR '(Someone) will wake up.'

1.1.6. Relatively little difference between men's and women's speech. Standard Japanese is characterized by relatively large differences between men's and women's speech. However, Kindaichi (1994) claims that this differentiation occurred very recently after the Meiji Restoration, and the difference can be observed only in the metropole, that is, the former capital, Kyoto, and the present capital, Tokyo. Like other non-metropolitan dialects, the Tohoku Dialect in general lacks a sharp distinction between men's speech and women's speech. Both men's speech and women's speech in this dialect are regarded as similar to men's speech in Standard Japanese, because many features of men's rough speech in Standard Japanese are used by both men and women in the Tohoku Dialect. As a result, Tohoku women's speech is regarded to be rough and unrefined, as opposed to that of Standard Japanese women's speech. For example, the very informal first person pronoun *ore*, the second person pronoun *omae*, and the affective particle *yo*, which are used exclusively by men in Standard Japanese, are common among both men and women in Tohoku Dialect, as in (4)

- (4) Ore yo, kinna kaze hiide yo, (dialect, male and female)
 Ore yo, kinoo kaze hiite yo, (Standard, male)
 I yesterday cold catch
 'Yesterday, I caught cold.'

2. Image and perception. The features listed above are connected with the image of backwardness associated with Tohoku Dialect. As noted by Shibata (1978), the name *zuuzuuben* itself reflects the characteristics of the dialect which are salient in popular perception: voiced sounds, confusion among *shi*, *su* and *shu* and between *zi*, *zu* and *dju*, and heavy and slow talk which makes it sound as though syllables are being lengthened. Kindaichi (1994) states that negative feelings in Japanese tend to be expressed with voiced sounds and positive feelings with voiceless sounds, so that in a number of Japanese onomatopoeic words, negative feelings are expressed with voiced sounds; this would cause speakers of Standard Japanese to have a generally negative feeling towards the voicing processes of the Tohoku Dialect. The voicing, slow talk, lower pitch, and distinctive intonation of the Tohoku Dialect gives the appearance of backwardness while the minimal difference between men's and women's talk creates the impression that Tohoku women are unrefined tomboys. The general feeling of non-Tohoku people is that the Tohoku Dialect sounds *kurai* 'dark' or 'dismal', and *omoi* 'heavy'. As a result, the Tohoku Dialect is stigmatized. Various writers from Tohoku have described this stigmatization from their own experience (Dazai n.d., Inoue n.d. et al.)

As in other societies, the low status of the Tohoku Dialect reflects the low prestige of its speakers. The Tohoku area has suffered from poverty, its average income is the lowest in the country (outside of Okinawa), it has poor education, it has relatively little modern industry, and it relies heavily on rice cultivation.

The Tohoku Dialect sometimes appears in the mass media as a 'marked' dialect. The TV soap opera 'Oshin' --a biography of a woman born to a very poor peasant family in a small village in Tohoku, sold as a housemaid at the age

of six, and having an extremely hard life-- was the most popular show in Japan in the 1980's. The hunger, poverty, and misery of her life were expressed vividly in this dialect, and this reinforced its low status.

Another TV character is an American actor, who speaks the Tohoku Dialect of Yamagata Prefecture. This young, blond Californian, who was originally sent to Tohoku for an English education program, has become extremely popular and now appears on several national TV shows. He is amusing because he speaks this unvarnished country dialect fluently and unabashedly in front of fashionable Japanese celebrities. Comedians who speak this dialect are laughed at because of their dialect and hillbilly-like appearance rather than the content of their talk.

In spite of this stigmatization at the national level, it cannot be said that Tohoku Dialect lacks local prestige (Labov 1963). This was reflected in an incident in 1993, when a middle school student who had just moved to Yamagata and so could not speak the dialect properly died as a result of *ijime*, the ritual teasing given to social outsiders, which involves verbal and physical abuse.

3. Definition of the Yonezawa Dialect. Since the end of the 19th century, dialectologists as well as people in Yonezawa have defined the Yonezawa Dialect as the language spoken in the castle of the Uesugi Clan and the immediately surrounding town. The dialects spoken in the countryside around Yonezawa have been excluded from this definition, and these neighbor dialects were labeled as *inaka-go* or *zaigoo-go* 'country languages' (Kamimura 1977). This attitude still remains among people of Yonezawa, even though the new administrative area of Yonezawa covers a much larger area. Contrary to the dialectologists' claim that the Tohoku area lacks honorifics (Kindaichi 1977), the Yonezawa Dialect is characterized by the frequent usage of honorific and politeness forms which were developed by the caste system. Example (5), from a conversation between two old women, illustrates these honorifics:

- (5) Iya iya sappari **kawayananne** **besshi?**
 Ara ara sappari kawarareteinai desho?
 oh oh at-all not-change (honorific) aren't you
 'Oh, you haven't changed at all, have you?'

(It will be noted that postvocalic voicing is variable, e.g. *sappari* in (5) rather than *sabbari*; I will return to this variability below.) The speaker uses a dialectal honorific form, *kawayananne* (which means 'not change') instead of the plain form, *kawanne*. Also, the speaker uses combination of a tag particle be explained in 1.1.1.5. and affective particle *shi*. This polite particleshi marks Yonezawa dialect. Examples (6) and (7) are taken from a music lesson:

- (6) Chotto, midede **kudai** na?
 Chôtto, mîtete choodai ne?
 a-while watch please TAG
 'Please, watch for a while.'

Rogu	o	motto	osanai	to	dame	da.
Rokû	o	môto	osânai	to	damê	yo.
six	PAR	more	not-push	if	bad	PAR

'You have to push the #6 string harder.'

Sogo nana da **ba**?
 Soko nāna de sho?
 there seven PAR TAG
 'It's the #7 string, isn't it?'

- (7) Koto ya san ni renraku tsukkara ya.
 Koto ya san ni renraku tsūku-kara ne.
 koto shop HON to contact because TAG
 'We can contact the koto tuner.'

hai, son dogi wa **oidatte** **kudai**.
 hai, sono toki wa oīdeninatte kudāsai
 yes that time PAR come (honorific) please
 'Yes, please come at that time.'

Aside from the honorific usage in (7), (6) and (7) are also characterized by some specific dialect features, i.e. the usage of *kudai* 'please' (*kudasai* in Standard Japanese) at the end of (7), and the interrogative particle *ba* at the end of (6) which is used only by local women of upper class households.

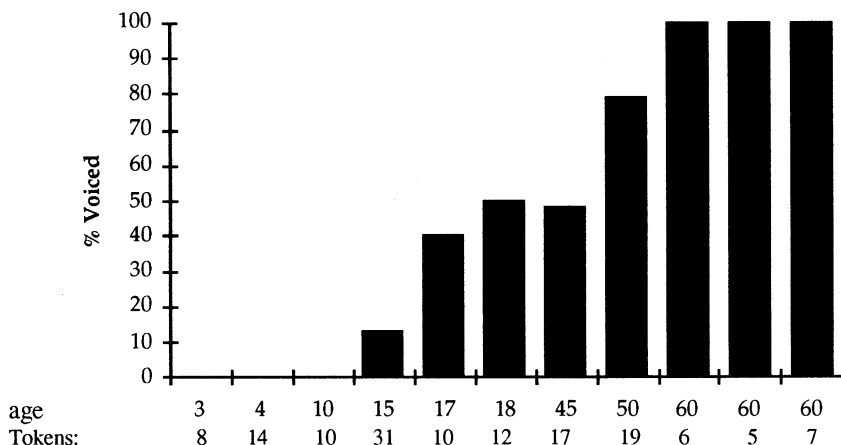
In these examples we can observe class and gender stratification of the dialect. *Besshi*, as in (5), is used by non-upper-class women and men of any social class, while *ba*, as in (6), is only used by upper-class women. Local honorific terms of this type are associated with solidarity and are particularly used in conversations between people who are familiar with each other. These usages are considered to be exclusive to Yonezawa, and serve to mark the speakers as different from those of surrounding areas. As a result, people living outside of the city often describe the people of Yonezawa and their language as *otakai* 'full of themselves'.

Even though the direct descendants of the Uesugi Clan no longer live in Yonezawa, those people who accumulated their wealth under the Shogunate have flourished. In reality, it is the merchants and manufacturers, especially of the safflower-dyed silk textile and sake, and the traders who have kept their wealth and remained at the top of the prestige hierarchy since the Meiji Restoration. During the period of rapid economic growth as well as the oil-shock of the 1970's, these traditional elite suffered a crisis. Some of them closed their factories and started different businesses, while others tried to stay in business by modernizing their products. Some are no longer at the top economically, but their family names still carry high prestige.

Usages which have local honorific and politeness forms are often labeled as *hataya kotoba* 'language of weavers'. This is the speech of the traditionally wealthy and prestigious families, and it is idealized locally as the most sophisticated version of the Yonezawa Dialect.

4. Age differences. There is a clear difference between the speech of younger and older speakers as can be found in many societies. For example, Table 1 gives data on postvocalic voicing (e.g. *midai* for Standard Japanese *mitai*) for 11 individuals of different ages.

Table 1--Frequency of postvocalic voicing



As can be seen, postvocalic voicing is much more common for older speakers than younger speakers. In the speech of the younger children I recorded, I found considerable variation in use of dialect features. Toddlers spoke in a range of styles, sometimes even using colloquial Standard Japanese, and the 5th graders I recorded used dialect words but not phonological features (except for lack of pitch accent). Compared with the speech of their forties and fifties, that of high school students lacks local honorifics and polite forms; they do use dialectal words and phonological features (although, as can be seen from the data in Table 1, they do not have postvocalic voicing as much as older people). So we see that, in my data, the older the speaker, the stronger the features of the dialect are.

5. Apparent age grading. Since Labov's study of Martha's Vineyard in 1963, sociolinguists have paid particular attention to the distinction between real time and apparent time; an observed difference in synchronic usage between young and old people may be due to a change in language (a real time difference) or consistent changes over the lifetimes of individual speakers (an apparent time difference). It might appear that the phonological features as well as lexicon of Yonezawa Dialect is disappearing, and this is indicated by the children's speech. However, there is a sharp distinction in dialect usage in my data even between children just a few years apart in age, and it seems unlikely that a real time change could be instantiated so quickly and clearly.

Consider the data in Table 2, taken from a questionnaire survey of high school students:

Table 2--Use of the dialect among high school students

Do you use the dialect:	% of yes		Grade
	10th	12th	
Speaking to your teacher in class?	46%	78%	
Speaking to your teacher outside of class?	51%	81%	
N	35	35	
In class--chi. sq.=8.27, $p<.01$, out of class--chi. sq.=6.17, $p<.025$			

We could not expect a real time change to affect 30% of the population in only two years. A more plausible interpretation is that the social context of interaction between students and teachers changes significantly between 10th grade and 12th grade; by the time they become seniors, students are on a more equal basis with their teachers, joke with them more, and use more dialect. Additionally, I observed that former classmates of mine still living in Yonezawa now have more dialectal features than they did 15 years ago, and other local people have also told me that they have observed this pattern.

In this situation, the most likely conclusion is that we have apparent age grading. It appears that young children are exposed to both the dialect and the standard and mix dialectal words into their usage, but they do not have dialectal phonological patterns such as merging of *i* and *u*, postvocalic voicing or local honorifics. As they get older, they apply dialectal phonological rules more frequently and learn local honorific forms, reserving the standard language for interaction with outsiders, written language, and certain types of social situations.

While increased dialect usage over the course of an individual's life has not often been reported, it is not unknown. In Labov's 1963 study of Martha's Vineyard, he found that local residents who went away to college and then returned with a commitment to spend their lives on the island showed greater dialect usage over the course of time (Labov 1972: 31):

(E.) is a college graduate who tried city life, didn't care for it, came back to the island and built up several successful commercial enterprises on the Chilmark docks. He shows a high (ay) at 21, considerably more centralized (=dialectal Y.M.) than anyone else I have heard at Chilmark. One evening, as I was having dinner at his parents' house, the conversation turned to speech in general, without any specific reference to (ay) or (aw). His mother remarked, "you know, E. didn't always speak that way...it's only since he came back from college. I guess he wanted to be more like the men on the docks..."

There is a clear reason why maintaining the dialect is possible in modern Japan. Written Japanese is always Standard Japanese; reading, writing, and examination is conducted in Standard Japanese. If Yonezawans have to talk with outsiders or become national figures and speak on Radio or TV, they base their speech on the standard language.

6. Prestige vs. Stigmatization. It is generally accepted that the Tohoku Dialect has been a symbol of backwardness and an object of ridicule. However, analysis of my questionnaire survey shows that Yonezawans of all age groups feel a strong pride in their dialect.

Unlike other sociolinguistic studies, my studies found that pride in the Yonezawa Dialect is most strongly expressed by people in their forties, who currently hold economic and political power in the city. At meetings about local business and politics, they use the dialect. This pride comes from their historical background, as the descendants of the great Uesugi Clan, who fought against the Tokugawa Shogunate. The Uesugi Clan was humiliated by the central government after their defeat, but rather than causing a feeling of shame, this served to reinforce their hostility toward the central government, and this is reflected in their language attitudes.

Maintenance of the dialect is also strengthened by the traditional kinship system. The patrilineal system, whereby the oldest son to live in or near his parents' household in order to continue the family name and the family business, has a strong stabilizing influence on the social structure of the city.

Studies of Western cities such as Trudgill's (1972) analysis of Norwich have found that women have a tendency towards more standard usage. I did not observe this tendency in my study of the Yonezawa Dialect; men and women equally speak the dialect, although some lexical items are used exclusively by women. I believe that this difference is due to the fact that, in Western societies, members of the local higher classes would speak a more standard variety, so that women hoping to enter these higher classes would also speak in a more standard fashion. In Yonezawa, on the other hand, the local higher class people are as strongly committed to the local dialect as anyone else, and speaking the standard (other than in specific contexts) is not seen as elegant or educated but simply alien.

Milroy and Milroy (1992) note that in societies where informal ties are strong, the dialect tends to be maintained. My case study of Yonezawa shows that the local residents' ties of kin or friends are not simply informal but extend to the public domain, such as the economic and political sphere; therefore, the mechanism for maintaining the dialect also extends to the whole public domain. The prospects for the continued survival of the Yonezawa Dialect are therefore better than they would be in a case where the highest class local residents look outside their community for sources of prestige.

NOTE

¹This characteristics is also observed in the neighboring Kanto District except Tokyo and Kanagawa.

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